



By Carly Avezzano, Analuna Brambila, Julia Gay, and Molly Sowash

Introduction

This year we have had an amazing experience living in the Macalester EcoHouse. As four individuals who are very committed to community engagement and making meaningful connections through important issues, we formulated our idea for a house project. We wanted to create experiences, conversation, and a product that would engender these values. A community and environmental issue that is important to all four of us is food, where it comes from, how it is grown, and where it goes.

Everyone eats. We all must consume food every day; it is one of the only truly universal aspects of living in this vast and diverse world. However, we believe that people do not think enough about their food and the faces and stories behind it, so we set out to do some exploring to uncover those stories. This led us to the idea of an interview anthology. So, we contacted various farmers in the Twin Cities area, and many graciously and excitedly agreed to participate in our project. We spent months driving out to farms and conducting interviews, hearing wondrous stories, and getting to know people we never would have met without this project.

We asked each farmer to share about their experiences and beliefs, and we also asked them to share some pictures of their farms, which we have included in this book. And so “Conversations with Farmers” was born.

Every farmer showed their passion about food and the environment through personal stories and lively political discussions. We have learned about how corporations have misappropriated organic, sustainable terms to claim that their products are “natural” or “green” when they are not. We have learned that there are hundreds of varieties of garlic, all with distinctly different flavors. We have learned that many of the health issues faced by Americans can be solved by eating unprocessed, seasonal foods. We have learned that keeping weeds between rows prevents droughts and erosion. We have learned that to be an organic farmer, you must sweat and work hard every day, connect consumers to their food sources, accept the challenges of weather, plan far in advance, and care deeply about growing the beautiful, diverse food that sustain us.

Most importantly, we have learned the importance of acknowledging the story and the face behind every nurturing bite of food we eat, and sharing the wisdom of these stories with those around us. We hope that by reading this book, you too will have an inspiring and thought-provoking experience you will carry with you into the future.

Thank you for reading!

-Analuna, Carly, Julia, and Molly

Martha and Geoffrey Or'Hai Black

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While a one-year infant with big blue eyes and ruffled hair happily babbles away on the couch between them, Martha Or'Hai and Geoffrey Black tell us about Avodah Farm, how they got there, and where they hope to go in the future.

They each sport comfortable clothing, kind eyes, gentle smiles, and long straight braids down their backs, and Elijah, their son, keeps playing with his mother's as the family sits on the couch at the EcoHouse. Sipping tea and munching on homemade biscotti, Martha and Geoffrey recount their deepest loves, struggles, and connections with farming. Through the conversation, we nervously (this is our first interview!) start to discover bits and pieces of what it means to be a farmer in our current world.

First of all, what is a CSA farm anyway? Community supported agriculture involves individuals or families who pay a farm up-front (buying CSA “subscriptions” or “shares”) for regularly delivered boxes of produce of whatever the farm produces throughout the season. The number of CSA farms across the country is expanding rapidly, and they give people a chance to eat locally-grown, fresh food that may include vegetables, fruits, honey, dairy and egg products, and even sometimes meat and fish products as well.

At Avodah Farm in Pepin, Wisconsin, Martha and Geoffrey grow “almost any vegetable you can think of.” The couple is currently renting three acres of land and last year sold twenty-four subscriptions. They assured us right off the bat that running a CSA is extremely “planning-intensive,” including lists, schedules, and maps that are drawn-up starting as early as January and February.

How did Martha and Geoffrey end up as vegetable farmers in the midwest? For one thing, they “both grew up in the country in kind of hippie homes,” learning about farming and subsistence skills from a very young age. Their fated paths crossed when they were just young teens at summer camp, where they “fell in love and stayed in love for a long time.” Although they laughingly tell us that they can't remember why they decided to take the internship in the first place, Martha and Geoffrey really knew that they wanted to farm for the rest of their lives after they spent the summer between their sophomore and junior years in college working on an organic farm.

Martha tells us that “when we were done, we pretty much never talked about doing anything else with our life after that,” and that they agreed that they wanted to raise their family in the countryside, and thus Avodah Farm was born in 2012.

As for where they want Avodah Farm to go in the future, it is clear that Martha and Geoffrey have many always-evolving and exciting plans. They want us to know that “quality of life is a really important thing” for them- they want to have enough land to build a house in which to raise a family, a barn and pasture to raise animals, and to continue their vegetable growing. To be able to make any kind of profit from the operation, they are shooting to eventually get about one hundred CSA shares, because “if you do everything really well...you get about a third of what your gross is” to pay themselves. They’re hoping to be able to sell at the Farmers’ Market in the Twin Cities in the future as well.

Avodah Farm is not currently certified organic, although they are up to speed with the USDA organic standards and follow them as closely as possible. They absolutely use no sprays, because they tell us that “on a very fundamental level it doesn’t make sense” to spray their foods with “something that says very clearly all over it that it’s a poison.” Martha and Geoffrey “believe in the organic movement, but it just doesn’t fit with what [they’re] doing with [their] farm right now,” because the certification process is very expensive and time-consuming. However, they do not feel it is currently necessary, as they have a personal relationship with most of their customers who know and trust their farming methods.



What are Martha and Geoffrey's favorite parts of farming? Martha tells us about the deep connection she feels with the lifestyle and the knowledge that people have been "doing it since we invented agriculture." She loves that she gets to have Elijah with her every day and talks about the "powerful freedom" she feels from running and living on her own farm.

Geoffrey sums up his connection to and love of farming beautifully: "my favorite thing about farming is just knowing that we're on the side of life. We're not fighting life- we're working with life. And, you know, every year...we plant these tiny little dead-looking seeds in the dirt, and every year you know there's some part of me that really doesn't believe they're gonna grow, and...they grow! The leaves come out of the ground and they take sunshine and air and dirt and water and turn it into something beautiful and delicious that sustains us."

What is Martha's favorite thing to grow? She can't give us a straight answer. "I don't have a relationship with any single plant, but the varieties that we plant...I get in these tangles, emotionally, with them, where like I fall in love, I think they're going to be my best friend, they betray me, I'm hurt, I'm wounded...we go through a lot of this."



What is Geoffrey's soul food? "I'd definitely be some kind of a root crop- something kind of humble and unassuming. I just want to be like cooked into a stew- just be part of the flavor profile. I don't want to be the star of the show."



Finally, when asked about the most important lessons they've learned, Geoffrey and Martha impart with us some lovely words of wisdom. First of all, they talk about how they really had no idea what they were doing when they started their own business in 2012, but they found out that they could do it anyway (an encouraging and optimistic thought). They discussed with us stories of unpredictable climate and season length, and the "zen practice" that Martha gets from having to trust the season changes. They bring up the importance of flexibility, faith in nature, and foresight. In the end, though, Martha returns to the always-present lesson they learn again and again without fail. She says, beautifully and confidently, that "you fall in love with this vigor that plants have- this innate will to live." It is this everlasting life that Geoffrey and Martha strive to always support, nurture, and take part in as their family works and lives at Avodah Farm.

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On a sunny morning in early February, we took a drive to the Lower St. Croix River valley to visit Fresh Earth Farms. When we arrived, we were welcomed by the brisk winter air and Chris James, who started Fresh Earth Farms with his wife, Susan James. We headed into the nearby greenhouse and as we stood among rows of raised plant beds, Chris began to share with us the story of how he came to be the proud owner of Fresh Earth Farms.

Chris did not always know he wanted to be a farmer. In fact, he explained that he and his wife previously lived in Silicon Valley, California. With a degree in chemical engineering from the University of Minnesota, Chris spent his time in California as an ionic science engineer and later entered into the field of artificial intelligence. It was only until the financial crisis that he and his wife decided to move back to Minnesota. They bought a large plot of land because at the time his wife had a horse who needed the extra space. In 2002 they purchased twenty acres, and after a fruitless job search and with a child on the way, Chris and Susan felt that the next reasonable step would be to farm the land for profit.



Although Chris did not have much previous experience with farming, he did keep a small organic garden during his years in California. Thus, starting his farm was a matter of scaling up from picking weeds in a garden to farming eight acres of land. He was luckily given the opportunity to attend a two-day market class, offered at the nearby University of Wisconsin. There, he was introduced to a community of local farmers who acted as a support system while he built his business.

Fresh Earth Farms began by selling vegetables at farmers' markets but is now a "True CSA" or a "Pure CSA," meaning that Chris and Susan are fully committed to their CSA members and they do not sell to farmers markets or restaurants. When asked why he chose to have a CSA farm, Chris responds, "I look at it more as a business model than a box of produce. It seems always marketed and advertised as a box of produce, but I see it as a real connection with the farm and a reward model where, if we do really well, our members get lots of produce. If things don't go so well, they get a little bit less. They get all of the rewards."



Chris explains that for his farm, sticking to one type of business model makes the most sense. According to Chris, if you have both a CSA and a farmers' market farm, you have competing scale channels. He elaborates, "If you have a bounty of something the bounty goes to the farmers market, it doesn't go to the CSA member, which is the exact opposite of what a CSA is supposed to be... At some point I realized, the CSA members are the customers. They're the ones you want to satisfy."



Chris chose to farm organically because he understood the harmful nature of chemicals due to his chemical engineering background. He explains, "I guess I would go back to my chemical engineering background and think about all of the chemicals that we use and why are we using all these things. Is it really that necessary? Chemicals are dangerous in themselves, so why would we want to put them on the plants that we are going to eat?" For that reason, Chris feels organic farming is the most sensible way to farm.

Chris notes that organic farming comes with many challenges, particularly in Minnesota where the weather is unpredictable. In addition to weather related challenges, Chris explains that he has had trouble finding employees. Since his farm does not have facilities for housing, he has struggled to find employees who are comfortable with the twenty minute commute from the Twin Cities.

When asked what is his favorite part of farming, he responds without hesitation: “For me, it’s interacting with our customers, our members. Sixty-five percent of our members pick up at our farm, so sixty-five percent of the members I interact with on a daily basis. I can understand what they like, what they don’t like, what they had problems with, what they really enjoyed. That’s the part of farming that I really love. Talking to people about what we are doing right and trying to fix what we are doing wrong.”

For future CSA members, Chris suggests figuring out what you really enjoy eating and then joining a CSA that grows that produce. Chris says the a common mistake customers make is assuming all CSAs are the same. He is also aware of the fact that not all people are suited to be CSA members. According to Chris, “Some people are better suited for farmers’ markets and you have to figure out if you are a CSA person or a farmers’ market person. A CSA person tends to be really adventurous in their eating, they want to try a lot of different things, they don’t shy away from something like kohlrabi. Whereas a farmers’ market type tend to be the people who plan the whole meal for a week. Some people have made the transition where they do their meal planning after they receive their CSA share.”

Chris hopes to have up to 200 CSA shares for this upcoming season. When he started the farm, he aspired to have a wide variety of produce for fewer members so that Fresh Earth Farms could become a one-stop shop for all of the members’ produce needs. Chris soon realized that it was hard enough just understanding how to grow all the different vegetables.

Since then, he has partnered with a number of complimentary farms that do provide everything from seafood, to cheeses, grass-fed organic meat, nuts, and coffee beans. He elaborates on this business choice by stating, “It follows the idea of a lot of things for fewer members, but without all the excess work.”



Finally, we end our insightful discussion by asking about Chris’s soul food. After a few moments of thought, Chris eloquently responds, “Heirloom tomatoes, because there are lots of different flavors and textures and, looking back on my life, I’ve done a lot of different things not following the typical path.” Chris certainly took a unique path in creating his farm, but has found passion in organic farming due to his appreciation for nature and his love for people. It was a pleasure to hear Chris’s story and we wish him all the best with future endeavors related to Fresh Earth Farms and beyond.

Terrie and Joe Adams

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When we pull up the gravel driveway, we sit in the car for a moment and look out at the snow-covered fields, trying to imagine them full of leafy greens and juicy tomatoes, purple eggplants and multi-colored peppers. The white canvas of winter lets us paint our own picture of a farm bursting with life, but it is hard to believe anything could grow here after this polar vortex of a winter. After hearing Joe and Terrie's stories however, we would have no difficulty seeing the potential for new life under the snow.

After a warm welcome, we settle down with freshly baked muffins and honey. We pass around a mug of home-grown spearmint tea from the farm to taste the fresh minty flavor. Terrie tells us that one of the benefits of belonging to their CSA is that members can go out and harvest all the tea they want. They grow chamomile, peppermint, lemon verbena, spearmint, and raspberry. She tells us how she goes out and picks bunches to tie and hang by a thread to dry. "Isn't it interesting the knowledge we have lost?" she remarks, "all of these teas are being imported from India. So I think, shipping halfway around the world, polluting the oceans, for something that grows here like a weed. But we've lost that knowledge."

They recall learning about the healing qualities of chamomile while living in a poor community of Peru and launch into a story of their three years in South America. As members of the Rotary Club, Joe and Terrie worked on a project to fight the cholera outbreak by digging a sanitation canal. But it seems that short-term project wasn't enough for them. The next year they returned to build a clinic and community center. They had always said they would volunteer in a developing country when it was possible and they realized that this was the time. So they sold everything and moved down to Peru to live in grass huts and manage the construction of a large parish. They ended up developing a jobs-through-education program which started with nine students and grew to its current size of eighty students. Joe proudly states, "And all of our students except for two have found either meaningful jobs or created businesses." "In a land of seventy-five to eighty-five% unemployment," Terrie adds.

We have become lost in their stories of traveling and volunteering until one of us asks, “So how did both of you get started in farming? How did this farm start?” Both Terrie and Joe grew up on farms where they learned to be self-sufficient, raising a little bit of everything to support their operation. So the straw they needed for the chickens was grown on the farm. The manure that was generated went back into the fields where the feed was raised. “It all just fed itself.” What little paper waste they created was burned in barrels and then sprinkled onto the cucumber plants to add nitrogen to the soil. The tin man came along once a year to recycle tin. Joe recalls the ice cream sundaes they hosted with the extra milk the creamery wouldn’t buy. There was no accumulation of stuff and no waste.

Terrie recalls selling their tomatoes and milk eight miles away, their meat four miles away, and their eggs thirty miles away. She compares her childhood experience of local farming to the unsustainable system today: “If there’s any milk raised around there it goes to New Orleans, 1,500 miles away. And that is happening with all of our food all across the nation. And the whole system is based upon cheap gas.” When they were growing up, everyone raised all of the food they could to support themselves.

“Bigger is not better,” Joe reminds us. As an example, he explains the propane shortage that is threatening to ruin their nephew’s piglet operation, “the modern way is not always the best way.” Yet farmers are pressured to run such modern operations because people want the same food year-round, and they want it cheap.

What consumers don’t realize is that one of the easiest ways to stay healthy is to celebrate the seasons in which they eat. Joe lays it out for us: “Guess what, right now we’re eating a lot of fatty foods, soups and stews and breads. In two more months, the salads come and we’re cleansing our system with the salads. And then as we go through the summer we get heavier and heavier and heavier until we end up with the squashes and potatoes. And that’s a natural life cycle.” Instead, we eat big, red, flavorless strawberries for Christmas dinner. “It just doesn’t make sense.”

After Joe and Terrie got married, they traveled to trade shows, selling manufactured agricultural tools. Before retiring and heading down to South America, they bought a farm for their son and grandchildren. After finding out their son wasn’t interested, they hired a manager for five years while they volunteered with the National Park Service. Eventually, they came out of retirement to take over the farm. On the eight and a half hour car ride there, they made all the major decisions about the farm- they would have a CSA and practice organic, sustainable agriculture.

As they tell their story of growing up on family farms, traveling all over the country, volunteering around the world, we realize that wherever Joe and Terrie go, they seek meaningful work to promote positive change in the lives of others. Their passion for farming shows through in their discussion of the micro and the macro- from the beauty of a ripe tomato to the injustices of the corporate food system.

We ask them what is the most difficult part of farming and they immediately jump to the big level issues. “People not caring about their food,” Terrie responds. Her forehead creases as she laments how people no longer value their health- how Pepsi had a program for giving away baby bottles filled with soda. What’s more, “our society is putting all of our money and energy into disease care- hospitals, surgeries - and not into helping people live healthily.”

As organic farmers, Joe and Terrie are extremely concerned about the health of their nation- both its land and its people. “In the fifties, our government took the course that food had to be cheap and had to be mass-produced,” Joe tells us. We are the only country in the world that doesn’t pay fair market price for our food due to government programs and mass, cheap production, he explains. The majority of the population has moved off of farms. Therefore government policy focuses on urban development goals with little consideration to where their food comes from. “It frightens me when I go to the grocery and see asparagus from Peru, apples from South America and Chile, and I see exotic melons from Africa - all of which we could raise here but it’s cheaper to bring it in.” Fast food and non-organic produce, processed meals and convenience food filled with additives - we’ve lost the value of good quality food.

Those who still hold this value find it through CSAs like Joe and Terrie’s. Similar to the other farmers we interviewed, CSA provided the best option for Joe and Terrie to sell their produce. Becoming certified organic simply isn’t worth the red tape when they can go directly to their customers.

The large, corporate food system influences government policy so that organic certification or insurance has requirements that only apply to large-scale farming. For example, for them to get hail insurance they have to have three years of history raising the same crop on the same plot of ground. But healthy farming means rotating crops. So small farmers growing a diverse array of crops have difficulty securing insurance. Joe sighs, “Almost all the gov programs are skewed for the large, centralized production units rather than the small, neighborhood units.”

Eventually Terrie brings our question back to the personal. The hardest part of farming for them is the sheer amount of physical work. She does not elaborate but quickly moves on to express all of the positives about farming. She says, “It’s very long days and there’s so much to do, but you’re in the out of doors. It’s mother nature. It’s all of your senses. The birds singing!” She tells us about the trumpeter swans who fly up from the nearby lake, singing as they work hard to go uphill. When she’s out working and they fly overhead, she can look up and see the individual feathers. There is so much awe in her voice that we can imagine standing next to her in the field watching the birds fly over, admiring nature’s beauty.





Joe claims that one of the greatest pleasures of farming is the satisfaction of planting a seed and watching it grow to maturity. All of the visitors to the farm, from school children to interns, customers to young adults with intellectual disabilities, express their gratitude for spending time outside. We can tell that they genuinely care about these people, often saying things

like “they bloomed out in mother nature.” They take great joy in seeing their CSA members learn to eat good, whole foods and in the process lower their blood sugar, whip their diabetes, and lose weight. “For us to be able to share our limited knowledge with them and watch them grow into a healthier person - I can’t think of a better satisfaction Terrie and I have than watching these people discover that health is fun.”

Despite the problems they see with the conventional food system, Joe and Terrie find happiness by living out their values through organic farming and connecting to people along the way. They are hopeful for the future of farming because of the young people they witness who are committed to sustainable agriculture. They see so much creativity and inspiration in the work of young farmers who simply want to live a natural, healthy life. They have no taste for climbing the corporate ladder, and they’re praying that more and more

people who participate in the competitive business world will suddenly discover that “that isn’t any kind of life” and will start re-populating the farms. There is a lot of land out there that should be used better and more wisely.

New farmers are not the only solution to the issues within the corporate food industry. Education is also key. Joe emphasizes that it takes educating one person at a time. Their farm has hosted homeschooled students, a group from China, and CSA members. Part of learning about organic agriculture is picking the zucchini or walking along the bluebird trails - having the true farm experience. Every individual who learns how to eat in a healthy way, buy local and organic produce, reduce waste, and live sustainably makes a difference.

Unfortunately it is almost time to leave Marshwatch Farms and go back to our lives, Terrie’s empowering words lingering in the back of our minds. But

before we leave, we must ask them which food is their favorite to grow. It seems this is not such an easy question. Terrie replies, “Oh there are so many. And picking the first ones! To me it’s just a miracle of mother nature’s bounty and beauty.” Finally she decides her pets are the hoophouse tomatoes, and she revels in the miracle of helping them grow twelve feet tall, then picking them when they’re big and juicy.



Joe decides his favorites are apple trees and herbs. He loves orchards and growing apples to put up eighty liters of cider, fifty quarts of applesauce, and twenty pie fillings. “It’s like animal husbandry, getting to know each tree.” He also has dreams of growing an herb garden outside of the kitchen. As a trained chef, he would love to walk out his door to pick herbs whenever he needed them.



By the end of our conversation we realize that these people are models of what it means to live consciously - fostering education and community involvement, loving the land and believing in the potential for change. Before leaving, Terrie gives us some final words of wisdom, “The moral of the story is the power of you.” Then she points to each of us and looks us in the eye, “You, you, and you can start to change the world by changing yourself.”

*Photo Credit: Marshwatch Farms

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We drove up to the Baker's Acres Farm on a crisp February afternoon. As soon as we stepped out of the car, Lisa Baker, a warm, smiling woman in her early thirties, invited us inside the farm's newly built barn. She introduced us to her undeniably adorable cows, gave us a brief tour, and described the activities that take place in the barn during the summer months, allowing us to envision the farm in action. After our tour, we relocated down the street to Tumbleweed Tavern for grilled sandwiches and conversation. Lisa described the tavern as the restaurant where all the locals go after work. Sitting around the tavern's table, we soaked up the atmosphere of the small, rural town and began to discuss the story of Baker's Acres, the farm Lisa started on her own just two years ago.

Lisa Baker started Baker's Acres farm in 2012 after ten years of working for Fortune 500 companies. She explained that this type of work brought her financial security but little satisfaction. After receiving her master's degree at St. Mary's College and working for many years in the field of communications and marketing, she began to ask herself, "Why am I earning all this money? For what reason?"

To settle these feelings of restlessness, Lisa bought land in Avon, Minnesota in 2011, and a year later, decided to completely change her lifestyle. She positively reflects on this decision, stating, "I don't need a cubicle now. I'd be there when I'm 55 thinking, what did I do with my life? You never dream to sit in a cubicle for your whole life, but that's what society gears the masses to- at least some sort of unfulfilling life". Although Lisa's life change seems drastic, she eased into it by first living on the land full time and working for a company from home. In April 2013, though, she finally had the opportunity to quit her career and "she hasn't stopped running ever since." Lisa now runs Baker's Acres on her own, full time.

When asked why she chose to farm, Lisa explained that she has always been conscious of humans' relationship with the physical world and has thought extensively about the way people abuse mother nature. She elaborated, stating, "I've always had this obsession with understanding nature, whether it's human nature or natural qualities of something. So farming is just kind of a module for me to have an existence that is so much more simple and real." Life in the Twin Cities was especially hard for her because everything is man-made and nothing is untouched. She now appreciates her work because it forms a positive relationship with nature, instead of most jobs which either abuse it or ignore it.



On that note, Lisa also chose to farm organically because she believes that chemicals interfere with natural processes of the earth. She believes that the notion that people need to produce more and more to feed society is false. She philosophizes that by producing more, we are actually forming a society of people who can not sustain ourselves. Additionally, Lisa understood the power of organic eating when her mother fell ill in 2008. At that time, Lisa began to research the benefits of organic eating in relation to health and wellness. She recalls, “I realized how far we’ve gotten from eating real food. I got interested in food systems in Minneapolis- urban agriculture- and I realized we are so far from connection.” As she has gotten closer to the food system through farming, she now thinks often about how much people don’t know about what they are eating. She states, “That’s what keeps me doing it (farming), because it really is a hard life”.



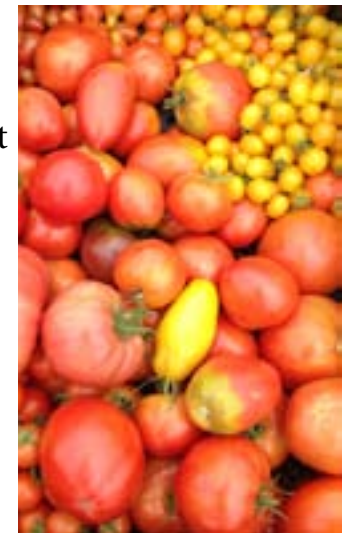
Right now, everything is a challenge for Lisa as a beginner who is learning as she goes. She notes some of her current challenges as buying the right amount of seeds, dealing with weed control, figuring out logistics, and tilling. Lisa is constantly doing research and listening to other farmers’ advice in order to gain knowledge about how to overcome such challenges. Out of everything though, her biggest challenge has been staying true to her morals about sustainability. She often hesitates to use any unnatural sources, such as fuel or plastic, but realizes she must use them to keep her farm running smoothly.

She describes this difficulty by saying, “Every time I try to use some input, it’s a big challenge to make it feel like it’s okay. I need to rationalize and always ask myself, is this the right track of sustainability that I’m going for? As you can tell, I’m a person that always asks what’s good and what’s right about it. I think too much instead of just doing.”



Despite these challenges though, Lisa is incredibly enthusiastic about her new lifestyle. Her greatest joys of farming come from “participating in life, doing something that we need for survival, and growing food.”

She concludes our conversation by stating, “It’s important and makes you feel good.” She sees her farm moving in the direction of a turn-key operation that is not too big or commercialized. She hopes it will one day be a family-run operation that creates enough income to survive.



Our conversation with Lisa taught us about the power of connectivity, the strength of defying norms, and the importance of living one’s life according to one’s personal definition of happiness. Lisa is an inspiring, hardworking woman who stays true to her values. We were so lucky to hear how these characteristics have shaped the creation of Baker’s Acres Farm, and are excited to see how the farm will grow in the coming years. ¹⁴

Emily Hanson

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Emily Hanson, an inspiring activist of twenty three years, has already started and run her own urban farm for three years, formed a new rural farm with her husband, and made many exciting plans for the future. She has dedicated herself to creating a more just and sustainable future by using the family farm model to promote education and activism.

Sipping tea on the couch of the EcoHouse, Emily found herself once again at Macalester College, the alma mater from which she graduated just three years ago. While Emily grew up in a small town with a big garden, she didn't know she would be a farmer until she took a farm job the summer after her Junior year at Macalester. She ended up "loving the physical labor of it, loving the rhythm of the day,



being outside every day...how much I was learning." She finally knew what she wanted to do after graduating college. As luck would have it, she ended up somewhat by chance connecting with two other fellow Mac students (Robin Major and Alex Liebman) who shared the same interest in starting an urban farm, and the rest, as they say, was history.

The three friends, along with Emily's husband Klaus Zimmerman-Mayo, began Stone's Throw Urban Farm. An urban farm works much the same as any other small-scale CSA farm, but operates inside city or town limits rather than on large plots of land in the countryside. Stone's Throw utilizes small patches of vacant lots around the Twin Cities. The farm started with only three vacant lots and has since grown to fourteen lots and sixty CSA members. The farm is run by four people, two part-time workers, and a few volunteers and interns.

Emily explains that her farm experience has been “evolving greatly,” as she and Klaus have made the big decision to leave Stone’s Throw and start their own farm (Whetstone Farm), as well as a producer cooperative. Their aim is “to do a 250-member CSA this year that will be sourced from four different farms...raising pasteurized meats...and also doing storage vegetables for our fall CSA share.” They are planning on selling to Bon Appetit here at Macalester, as well as to a few Minneapolis public schools.

One of the most important parts of farming for Emily is the use of her work as a tool for education and activism. She tells us that in terms of education, “it varies from just the informal interactions of people walking by on the street” or the farmer’s market and CSA customers, to the planned events, “we’ve hosted school groups, we’ve hosted Youth Farm groups, we’ve worked with high school students through the Minneapolis Step Up Achieve Program.” Stone’s Throw does not only teach people about farming and vegetables, however. Emily and her partners are very invested in food justice activism. She tells us, “I think we are all politically active and radical and want our farm to be a political expression of our values of social justice and ecological health, so we write a newsletter every week and in our small way we let our message out there and try to make our members aware of events that are going on or things that are important about farm justice issues.”

Looking into the future of her farm, Emily wants to “have an open dialogue with the community we’re serving about what does food justice really look like, what does it look like for farmers and...for consumers?”



She wants us to know that their co-op is “supportive of beginning and immigrant farmers- running a fair market for them- people who aren’t young and hip and English speaking and well educated.” Looking into their future at Whetstone farm, Klaus and Emily want to utilize the farm to both host school groups for a day, but also be able to employ troubled youth, or ex-convicts and provide for those people that might not have a chance otherwise.

When we asked Emily what the most difficult part of farming has been for her, she assured us that “starting your own business is really hard. I don’t think I could have done it without other people.” She has spent three years learning through experience and mistakes, as well as through relationships and successes. Another hard part of her lifestyle is “giving up in a lot of ways having a social life and being a young twenty something.” She also spoke of the difficulty of the financial uncertainty of farming. However, she readily expressed her love of farming; “I love the work, I love being outside, I really actually prefer having solid relationships with a few people.” When we asked her about the most satisfying aspects of farming, she told us about the empowered feeling she gets by getting to be her own boss. She loves feeling healthy and being outside, and notes that it is rare to get to work in the city and still be outside all day.

Finally, she cherishes the people and sights that she experiences by working on an urban farm; “you just see snapshots of people’s lives that you wouldn’t otherwise” and you meet “incredible people.” These experiences have given her a wealth of material for the book she wants to write someday about all of the diverse and amazing people she has met through her work.



We asked Emily about the biggest lesson she has learned through farming, and her immediate response was, “Oh my gosh! I’ve learned a lot.” She tells us about how she is forever learning about business and agriculture, how to successfully work with other people, and how she still has a long way to go. She admits that after she graduated from Macalester, she “had a very clear-cut idea of what was wrong and how the world should be, and was pretty quick to pass judgment on people and on the world for that.” But farming and the ideas and people she has been exposed to have opened her mind and given her “a lot more understanding and compassion for people.” She is constantly blown away by the variety of opinions and work regarding sustainability in the world.

Emily understands now that the world does not exist in black and white, good vs. bad, but that there is a vast amount of “gray area,” which she explained to us through a few stories of farmers who have changed their agricultural practices towards or away from organic farming due to various beliefs and circumstances.

As an organic farmer herself, we know that she has a personal relationship with the food she grows. Emily’s favorite vegetables to grow are beets and tomatoes, but she hates growing zucchini. She also drops in the note that “right now all the vegetables sound so good,” and we have to agree, as the biting wind and snowflakes whir past our window in this coldest of winters.

Finally, we ask Emily about her soul food and without pausing to think she tells us that she would be winter squash, because it is “the most delicious vegetable, and it stores well, and it’s just...a solid staple. It’s a keeper.” It was a pleasure interviewing Emily Hanson, and we quite agree that she is a fighter for justice and education- truly a keeper!



Karla Pankow and Elizabeth Millard

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Karla and Elizabeth were graciously interviewed over e-mail. Here are their answers:



Q: What is the farm's history?

K: I grew up in a small, agricultural town in West Michigan - population 449. Everyone was connected to farming on some level. Extended family members were farmers. My friends' parents were farmers. My brother is a farmer. I'm the only one in the family to go to college though - felt like I needed something different. So I moved away, did the college thing, landed the corporate gigs in sales, marketing, and business, and after 10 years, I knew I had to move towards something that gave me greater purpose and meaning.

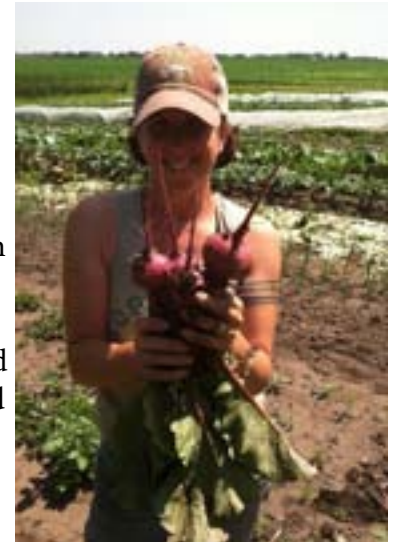
In 2010 in the small, remote village of Katete, Zambia, I met my partner Elizabeth. We were on the same team for Habitat for Humanity's Global Village program. We quickly fell in love with the simplicity, the self-sufficiency of the people, and the pride that came with growing and raising your own food.

Soon after returning back home to Michigan, I sought out a nearby organic vegetable farm and coordinated my own make-shift internship. During the day, I was wearing business suits and schlepping drugs for one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies. But at night and on weekends, I was knee deep in rich, organic soil taking in the sweet smell of freshly harvested carrots and the explosion of flavors on my tongue from cherry tomatoes still warm from the afternoon sun.

I was hooked.

A year and a half later, I left the corporate job and moved to Minnesota to be with Elizabeth. From there, I took on another internship - this time at a farm that worked in both livestock as well as in organic produce.

As of July 2011, we went all in and started Bossy Acres -- a name that we had picked out back in 2010 and which best represented the attribute that we both have in common!



We're now approaching our third season with continued success, love, passion, and balance.

Q: How has your farm changed?

Although we're only heading into our third season, the changes have been great. We started in 2011 by growing out of four raised beds in our backyard in South Minneapolis. From there in 2012, we farmed a rented 3/4 acre plot up in Dayton, near Rogers, while renting less than 600 sq. ft. of greenhouse space in Maplewood. The logistics alone were a nightmare, but we pushed through it and learned a lot of important lessons along the way. And now, in 2014, we're entering into our second season farming down in Northfield, a community rich in beginning and experienced farmers. We're so grateful to be a part of Organic Field School, an incubator program that provides beginning farmers reliable access to land, infrastructure, pack-shed, walk-in cooler, greenhouse, tractors, and implements. We can now take a step back a bit and breathe, learn our soils, focus on quality, and improve the efficiency of our business versus the constant worry that came with inadequate resources and poor logistics. While we have up to five years in this program, we will be starting the long process of looking for a farm with the hopes to settle down on our own homestead within the next three to four years.

Q: What do you grow?

CSA farming has been noted as one of the most complex and intensive methods of farming; a graduate-level type of farming, if you will. Understandable, considering that the majority of CSA farmers grow upwards of 50-60 crops and 100-110 different varieties. Here in Minnesota we have a short growing season and because farming certainly comes with its risks, it's best to focus on diversity. Not only does crop diversity keep members engaged and interested, it also plays an important part in building our soils and enhancing the overall biodiversity of our land and environment. So with that being said, we grow everything from greens, to root crops, summer and fall favorites, specialty crops like ground cherries, and winter storage crops.



Q: Did you always or ever imagine yourself becoming a farmer?

K: I never thought I'd be a farmer, not until I was in my 30's that is. Growing up in a small agricultural town and the only one in my family to go to college, I felt the pressure to do something more with life, something bigger. Of course at the time, I didn't realize that farming was that something more, something bigger.

E: I never imagined myself becoming a farmer, but in some ways, I'm not surprised. I've been increasingly passionate about sustainability and our local food systems, and as a journalist, I've worked to write stories about people who are driving change. So, it was a happy transition to find myself with the opportunity to create change myself as a farmer.

Q: How has farming affected your life?

K: In many ways farming saved my life. When I was working in corporate, I was depressed and lived a life out of balance. Farming has brought greater activity to my life on numerous fronts; physically, mentally, and socially. It's brought me closer to my community, to my food system, and to my environment. And while the corporate paycheck and benefits aren't there any longer, there's not a day that passes that I regret being an organic farmer.

E: I've had a chance to see what it really takes to provide organic local food, and it's humbling. I can now see into the food system in a way I never could before, and to appreciate the incredible work that farmers do, and all the hurdles they need to jump to live their dreams.

Q: What are your beliefs about organic versus conventional farming, and why do you farm the way you do?

We think it's crucial to have farmers on the land and while we vote for chemical-free practices, we can understand why conventional farming exists. We follow USDA certified organic practices and would continue to farm in that manner despite certification interests. Simply, we believe that healthy soils translates to healthier plants and then, ultimately, healthier people. Farming, to us, isn't about yield per acre. It's about the stewardship of the land, cultivation of community, and the health of our environment.



Q: What advice do you have for consumers?

We live in a world that is, by far, the most complex it has ever been in terms of food choices. The wealth of options, alone, are enough to make one's head spin, but we're also in a time in which the consumer has far more education and resources at their fingertips about that food. The demand for local, chemical-free food continues to be on the rise as the safety and quality of industrial-scale agriculture is in question. Our advice always- know your farmer. In Minnesota, especially, we're fortunate to be surrounded by a wide spectrum of producers and purveyors. Much, if not all, of our diet can be sourced locally; from honey and maple syrup, to dairy, eggs, meat, and even grains. We also have access to abundant fruits, berries, and mushrooms. It comes down to making a conscious choice to support local and connect with area farmers and purveyors.

Q: What is the hardest part about farming?

Perseverance. There's no question that farming is a lot of work. The tolls that it can take both financially and physically can be overwhelming and disheartening, but we believe there's great power in pursuing one's passion in a way that is gradual and consistent. We work towards creating a life that, like the farming principles we apply, focus on balance and sustainability. Farming requires perseverance; one is best prepared for the challenge if they're not burning the candle at both ends.

Q: What do you love most about working on your farm?

There's something very enriching about a long day's work out in the fresh air, connecting with the land, the soil, and with life. There's not a day that goes by during the season that we're not in awe of the complexities and miracle of a seed. Being a part of that life cycle that ultimately nourishes our community is one of great honor and we're thrilled to play a small part.

Q: What is your favorite crop that you produce?

K: I like different crops for different reasons, but I'd have to say tomatoes is my overall favorite. Fresh, homegrown tomatoes still warm from the sun bring a certain nostalgia to folks. The excitement that arises around tomatoes, heirlooms especially, is unique and special. I've yet to find someone who gets that excited over a rutabaga!

E: Tomatoes- we grow such a wide variety, many of them heirlooms, and it creates a strong connection to the past just to walk through the rows. Picking a perfect, ripe tomato that's been sweetened by sunshine and tended by bees is a golden moment, and we get to have thousands of those throughout the season.

Q: Do you have a soul food?

K: I'm fascinated by peppers and their diversity of colors, shapes, sizes, and flavors. With each season, I'm amazed at the bounty that one plant alone provides and I'm especially drawn to its spectrum of uses. From fresh eating, to grilled, to salsas and jams, pickled, fermented, dried, medicinal uses, pest management qualities -- you name it, the pepper's where it's at!

E: I feel most connected to beets, because of the figurative connections it has for me -- root vegetable, shaped like both a hand and a heart. And of course, roasted beets are amazing. They make me feel nourished on every level.

Q: What is the biggest lesson you have learned through your experience in farming?

Don't underestimate the amount of organization and planning that farming and operating a CSA program, for example, involves. Farming is never about a piece of land and a handful of seeds. It's intensive and extensive. The amount of work, both physically and mentally, shouldn't be taken lightly. But, at the end of the day, it's so worth it.

Glossary

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) - An alternative farming/economic system that involves shareholders in a community (families or individuals) who pay for weekly boxed shares of a local farm's produce throughout the growing season. Contracts are renewed on a regular basis. While CSA's generally distribute vegetables, they may also distribute fruits, herbs, honey, and occasionally meat or fish.

For more information: <http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/csa/csa.shtml>

Land Stewardship Project - A non-profit organization dedicated to sustainable agriculture. It plays many roles including new farmer training, local organizing, federal policy creation, and community based food systems implementation.

For more information: <http://landstewardshipproject.org>

Minneapolis Step-Up Achieve Program - A job-training program for youth in the Twin Cities that connects youth with paid internships in the cities.

For more information: http://www.achievempls.org/stepup-achieve-what_is/

Organic - There are many different definitions of organic food. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has produced an official definition of organic farming (see link below), but organic generally means that no pesticides, herbicides, or synthetic fertilizers were used in food production. Farmers must go through a lengthy review and payment process to become officially organically certified by the USDA.

For more information: <http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/ofp/ofp.shtml>

Producer cooperative- Voluntary associations where members jointly manage farm production; generally, funds are pooled to run the business, and then earnings are divided.

For more information: <http://sfp.ucdavis.edu/cooperatives/>

Urban Farm - A farm that is created on unused land/space in an urban area with the mission of feeding the local people in an economically sustainable, educational, and affordable way.

For more information: <http://www.urbanfarming.org/movement.html>

Youth Farm - A non-profit youth development organization in the Twin Cities that uses farming and cooking to create positive youth experiences and relationships and to cultivate the next generation of community leaders.

For more information: <http://youthfarmmn.org>

Acknowledgments

We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to all of the people who supported us and contributed to our project. First of all, we want to thank all of the farmers for their beautiful words, kindhearted enthusiasm, and endless wisdom:

Martha and Geoffrey Or'hai Black (Avodah Farm)

Lisa Baker (Baker's Acres Farm)

Joe and Terrie Adams (Marshwatch Farms)

Emily Hanson (Stone's Throw Farm, Whetstone Farm)

Chris James (Fresh Earth Farms)

Karla Pankow and Elizabeth Millard (Bossy Acres)

We would also like to thank Ryan Edgington and Chris Wells for being our excellent advisors and guiding us through the creation of this book. In addition, we thank Suzanne Hanson for helping us secure funding and Nell Nordlie for teaching us about the design process.



Thank you for reading!

